



Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health Infant and Early Childhood Division Guiding Principles of Practice

**Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH)...
Is the developing capacity of the child from prenatal to six to:**

- **Form close and secure interpersonal relationships;**
- **Experience, regulate and express emotions;**
- **Explore the environment and learn...**

All in the context of family, community and cultural expectations for young children.

Infant and early childhood mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development.

ZERO TO THREE National Task Force on Infant Mental Health

The Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health-Infant and Early Childhood Division (MACMH-IEC) is committed to being a multidisciplinary, culturally responsive resource for integrating young children's social-emotional development research into the practices and policies affecting all young children, prenatal through age six, their families and caregivers in the state of Minnesota to promote optimal developmental outcomes. To achieve this, our evidence-based guiding principles include the following:

- 1) **The brain is developing rapidly in the first years of life.** All domains of development are interdependent, creating the foundation for all unfolding development, including lifelong learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. Because brain development stabilizes with age, "it's easier and more effective to influence a baby's developing brain architecture than to rewire parts of its circuitry in the adult years."
- 2) **Development is** the product of the interaction of genes and all experiences, beginning prenatally. From birth, children are active participants in their own development as they learn to select, engage and interpret experiences based on their earliest experiences. This back-and-forth process establishes the trajectory for future development. It is early caregiving relationships, and the systems which surround them, that provide the basic structure within which all development unfolds.
- 3) **Relationships are the catalyst and the context for all early learning.** While family members are the most important and influential relationships, children's relationships with other caregivers also influence developmental outcomes. Therefore, promotion, prevention and intervention for young children's healthy development must be multi-generational and sensitive to families' and caregivers' values and culture.

- 4) **The field of IECMH is inherently inter-generational.** Pregnancy and the birth of a child are a powerful point of entry for promotion, prevention and intervention services for young children and their families because of the neurophysiological and psychological changes associated with this period of life. Programs which **address the needs of the parent, the child, and the relationship between them** have been shown to significantly enhance early experiences with positive developmental outcomes.
- 5) **Early intervention and prevention for children whose development is at risk has been shown to shift the balance from risk to resilience.** While the earliest years of a child's life are a time of robust development, they are also a time of profound vulnerability. Development can be seriously compromised not only by delay or disability, but also by environmental influences including poverty, parental mental illness, substance abuse, racism and intergenerational trauma, parental history of trauma, and their experience of being parented, family violence, child abuse and neglect, loss of a caregiver, and poor quality child care. Policy and practice must acknowledge and address all these influences to assure optimal developmental outcomes for all children.
- 6) **Working with young children, their families and caregivers requires a specialized set of competencies,** firmly grounded in the unique developmental and relational needs of the earliest years. Infant and early childhood professionals represent a variety of disciplines, spanning a variety of program and service settings, including early care and education, early intervention, mental and physical health, child welfare and policy. Thus, a professional development system, based on an evidence-based core competencies system that formally recognizes an individual's qualifications for working with children prenatal to six, including skill in identifying and responding to both adults' and children's developmental needs, should be integrated across all disciplines.
- 7) **Self-awareness leads to better services for children and families.** Working with young children and their families is inherently arousing and the capacity for reflection on one's own feelings, reactions, cultural perspective, biases, and behaviors, and those of others is among the essential competencies for infant and early childhood professionals. Therefore, this complex work is best accomplished with supports that include **reflective consultation/supervision.**
- 8) **Programs and services for very young children and their families should be organized within cohesive systems that coordinate and align all the components that make up a comprehensive early childhood system, early learning guidelines, and quality improvement initiatives.** This is necessary to assure the availability and access to high quality, affordable, integrated services that promote healthy developmental outcomes.

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